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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a qualitative study of principals' perceptions of the impact of high-stakes testing on empowerment. The data were obtained from interviews with 26 "empowered" principals in select schools participating in the South Florida Annenberg Challenge. Three questions were addressed: (1) To what degree does a school's standardized test "grade" influence a principal's sense of empowerment? (2) To what degree and in what ways is morale affected by high stakes testing? and (3) What lessons do empowered principals have to share with others about the impact that empowerment has on the quality of teaching and learning in schools? Results show that testing commonly has a negative effect on principals' sense of empowerment. Testing appears to generate a pervasive fear of failure in lower grade schools. Grade "A" schools appear to use high-stakes testing in positive ways, such as incentives to create student-enrichment programs, whereas lower grade schools focus more on meeting students' basic needs. Lessons learned from the study are that schools are complex, requiring many heads to make good decisions; trust needs to be promoted and maintained among school personnel, district office personnel, and community; and barriers are overcome when problems are viewed as challenges. (Contains 29 references and 1 table.) (RT)

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Principals' Perceptions of the Impact of High Stakes Testing on Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative study of principal's perceptions of the impact of high stakes testing on empowerment. The data was obtained from interviews with twenty-six "empowered" principals in select schools participating in the South Florida Annenberg Challenge. Three questions are addressed in this study: 1) To what degree does a school's standardized test "grade" influence a principal's sense of empowerment?; 2) To what degree and in what ways is morale affected by high stakes testing?; and 3) What lessons do empowered principals have to share with others about the impact that empowerment has on the quality of teaching and learning in schools? Findings suggest that high stakes testing has an impact on morale in schools, on teaching practices, on leadership focus, and on the degree to which principals feel empowered.

Principals' Perceptions of the Impact of High Stakes Testing on Empowerment

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report the findings of a qualitative study of principals' perceptions in select schools participating in the South Florida Annenberg Challenge (SFAC). Initiatives such as SFAC are arguably an effort to encourage locally relevant reforms, thus improving the quality of education for students and enhancing a sense of empowerment for principals and teachers. Numerous researchers have claimed that the greater degree to which principals and teachers are empowered, the more they focus on improving teaching and learning processes (Bredeson, 1989; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). In direct conflict with this approach, many policy makers are trying to improve student achievement and raise standards of learning by utilizing high stakes standardized tests (Quality Counts 2001). Some research suggests that high stakes testing diminishes the ability of principals to feel empowered themselves (Kochan, Spencer, & Mathews, 1999; 2000), as well as to empower others. This focus on test results as often the sole measure of school success, combined with the ever-increasing demands of the job (Fullan, 1998), has led to increased stress among educators (Kochan, et.al, 1999; 2000).

The debates over social efficiency and political expediency versus individual development and the importance of local input are highlighted in this current trend in education (Levin, 1991). This study offers a view, through the eyes of empowered principals, the influence that high stakes testing has on leadership, teaching and learning processes, and morale in these schools. Three questions are addressed: a) To what degree does a school's standardized test "grade" influence a principal's sense of empowerment?; b) To what degree and in what ways is morale affected by high stakes testing?; and c) What are the lessons that empowered principals

have to share with others about the impact that empowerment has on the quality of teaching and learning in their schools?

Theoretical Framework

The Annenberg reform projects have been an attempt to encourage context-specific reform efforts in public schools. Schools, in partnership with higher education institutions, community agencies, and/or business representatives, have been encouraged to identify locally relevant means for improving the quality of teaching and learning. There are several underlying assumptions behind this approach. First, schools are a product of their community. The local values, resources, and opportunities greatly influence a school's culture and consequently opportunities to learn (Bartelt, 1994; Kantor & Brenzel, 1993). Second, schools are complex places (Fullan, 1998; Fullan & Miles, 1992), and these complexities are best addressed by those closest to the situation. Third, complex situations require teams of people working together (Senge, 1990) to create the best possible learning situations for students (O'Hair & Reitzug, 1997). These last two assumptions are often referred to as a rationale for empowerment.

Empowerment

Empowerment is a vaguely defined term connected to school reform efforts that has recently been embraced by conservatives and liberals alike (Perkins, 1995). As educational needs continue to grow in complexity, it has become apparent that more traditional models of school leadership are inadequate to handle the rapidly increasing responsibilities of school leaders (Fullan, 1999; Short, 1998). Empowerment, especially when used in policy discussions, is defined as an alteration in the distribution of power in the workplace (Gonzales & Short, 1996). Typically, we think of autonomy and teacher professionalism, decentralized decision making, and shared decision-making involving teachers, parents, community members and others.

Empowerment shifts the political context in schools (Wheeler & Agruso, 1996) and changes the role of principals (Short, 1998; Wheeler & Agruso, 1996; Short & Greer, 1997; King & Kerchner, 1991; and others). As this political context shifts, there is a greater emphasis on democratic schooling practices (Gutman, 1990; O' Hair & Reitzug, 1997) necessitating that administrators become more transformational and sensitive to diversity in their approaches with others (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000; Reitzug, 1994).

Principals help to create opportunities for teacher empowerment. Maeroff (1988) suggests that key empowerment components for teachers include increased status, highly developed knowledge about teaching and learning, and increased autonomy. An underlying assumption about teacher empowerment is that many leaders will develop within the school and school community (Wheeler & Agruso, 1996). Teacher leaders are encouraged to become more reflective about their practice, operating through constructivist and democratic behaviors (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000; O' Hair & Reitzug, 1997). Principals are seen as key to the success of school empowerment initiatives (Bartell, 1994; Short, 1998).

Teacher empowerment has been embraced by some principals and feared by others. Portin (1997) found that principals face increasingly complex interactions and tasks, yet feel that their capacity to lead schools has been limited. King & Kerchner (1991) suggest that principals have reason to be concerned about empowerment because their jobs are changing and there is ambiguity about this role redefinition. The factors that they claim cause principal discomfort include lack of role clarity, fear of teacher union goals, mixed signals from their district, and lack of training for new roles. Fuller and others (1999) have demonstrated that psychological empowerment, defined as increased intrinsic task motivation (p. 389), positively affects one's sense of job satisfaction and ability to influence others.

High Stakes Tests

In our current climate of high stakes testing, there is a great deal of pressure on principals to have their schools "perform". Florida, like most other states, utilizes high stakes testing to assess the "quality" of education in public schools. Since 1999, students in grades 4, 5, 8, and 10 have been tested. Beginning this spring, students in grades three through ten will be tested (Quality Counts 2001). The 1999 Florida Accountability Act has created a system where individual schools are assigned a letter grade based on how well students perform on standardized tests. These scores are highly publicized, and affect the amount of financial support money that schools receive from the state. "A" schools are given greater autonomy, including greater control over how their portion of the Supplemental Academic Instruction Categorical Funds are spent. District school boards are encouraged to "prioritize expenditures of funds received from the Supplemental Academic Instruction Categorical Fund to improve student performance" in "D" and "F" schools (Florida Department of Education, 1999). Interestingly, both the top performing schools and the lowest performing schools receive financial incentives. The schools that have average performance on achievement tests do not receive extra funding or other resources, nor are they rewarded with increased autonomy regarding how they spend school funds.

Most principals and teachers feel tremendous pressure to have their students do well on high stakes standardized tests. Studying the reactions of empowered principals provides one view of the potential benefits and consequences of high stakes testing on teaching and learning processes, leadership, and morale.

Research Methods

Participants

Twenty-six principals, all of whom were involved in the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, were interviewed by phone regarding their perceptions about principal empowerment. Principals were selected for interview if their school was involved in one of the longer running projects or if additional principals were needed to proportionately represent a school district. Not all principals selected for interview agreed to participate.

The principals represent schools in three county school districts in South Florida. We have named these districts Davidson County Schools, Washington County Schools, and Adams County Schools (pseudonyms). There were six male principals and twenty female principals in the study. The group was diverse, largely representing the population in South Florida. There were 13 who identified themselves as White, nine who identified themselves as Black or African-American, and four who identified themselves as Hispanic. The principals in this study had been at their present schools an average of 4.7 years, although 18 of them had been at their school three years or less. The years at their present school ranged from less than one to 26. There were three schools scoring a high grade (A-B), eight schools scoring an average grade (C), twelve schools scoring a low grade (D), and three schools scoring a failing grade (F). Twenty-four of these schools were elementary level and two were high schools (see Table 1).

Interview Protocol

Two teams of researchers, from Auburn University and the University of Miami, conducted the interviews using the same interview protocol. Interview questions focused on processes for decision making about a variety of instructional and school governance issues such as local innovations, other influences on decisions, critical incidents, school and personal

accomplishments, and principal empowerment in general. Notes were taken during the interviews, and efforts were made to capture the exact words of the principals whenever possible, although there was a stronger emphasis on capturing the essence of what was said.

Data Analysis

Initially, the interview notes were analyzed for emerging themes and frequency of responses. A team of four researchers conducted the analysis to ensure greater consistency. After preliminary data analysis suggested that there were differences in the types of responses offered in high performing schools versus lower performing schools, the data was reanalyzed. The state-assigned grade that each school received was noted on each interview and used as an independent variable in analyzing these interview transcripts and accompanying notes. Notes/transcripts were coded, and a constant comparative process (Patton, 1990) was used for analysis. Emergent trends were identified both for the group as a whole as well as for groups of principals whose schools received either a high grade (A-B), a passing grade (C), a low grade overall and failure in one content area (D), or a failing grade (F).[1]

[1] Note: According to the Florida Department of Education School Accountability Report Guide from June 1999, "F" schools have current year reading, writing, *and* (emphasis added) math data below minimum criteria. "D" schools have current year reading, writing, *or* math data below minimum criteria (emphasis added). "C" schools have current reading, writing, and math data at or above minimum criteria. "B" schools have current year reading, writing, and math data at or above higher performing criteria AND no subgroup data below minimum criteria AND at least 90% of standard curriculum students were tested. "A" schools meet grade "B" criteria AND the percent of students absent more than 20 days, percent suspended and dropout rate (high schools) are *below* state averages AND there is substantial improvement in reading AND there is no substantial decline in writing and math AND at least 95% of standard curriculum students were tested.

Findings

Analysis of this interview data suggests that principals in high performing schools (A-B) place less pressure on their teachers to perform well on standardized tests, even though high stakes testing is still a concern. Principals in "C" schools, however, appear to be greatly concerned about test results. Modifications to teaching practices and to the curriculum were more likely to occur in these "C" schools as compared with the "A" and "B" schools. Principals often spoke of the decrease in morale within the school and the difficulty of hiring new teachers because they were only a "C" school. Still, most of these principals described themselves as empowered and indicated that they actively sought to empower others. Principals in "D" and "F" schools frequently spoke of the high mobility rates at their schools and/or the high numbers of non-English speaking students attending their schools. Principals in these schools nearly always spoke about the huge impact that high stakes standardized tests had on their schools, both in terms of morale and teaching practices. For example, one principal stated that the emphasis on testing impacted her school "A great deal!" and that they "eat, drink, sleep, and breathe" the tests.

Interestingly, principals in most of these schools (A-F) also described themselves as empowered, however it appears that the ability to determine their own course of action, particularly with regard to testing, is diminished. We explored possible contradictory statements made by principals regarding their degree of empowerment. These included statements made by principals in "A" schools as well as "F" schools. Throughout many of the interview transcripts there were comments made regarding the frustrating impacts of testing on curriculum, instructional and assessment practices, and teacher morale. Yet, many of these same principals

also described themselves as being empowered. As one principal of a "C" school said, "I have autonomy as long as my school's test scores are good and I'm not in conflict with district mandates." Yet, when asked in what ways she felt unempowered, this same principal responded, "Not empowered? None. I'm left alone to do my job." The principal of an "F" school stated, "I never see barriers. Some things happen and I do whatever I can to change it. Being labeled an F school *could* have been a major psychological barrier for the staff, but I try to be positive and persuade my staff to be positive as well." Yet, this same principal described her frustration at having an intervention team in the school. "I feel that someone is looking over my shoulder. The Intervention Team is from another school that is worse off than we are. So, why are they here?"

It does not appear that a school's standardized test "grade" influences a principal's *espoused* sense of empowerment. Rather, the comments made by these principals could suggest that personality and degree of optimism were greater predictors of how a principal viewed his or her sense of efficacy. Still another possible explanation is that some principals may be giving "lip service" to the degree of empowerment that they enjoy. As one principal of a "C" school stated,

> Principals do have some empowerment, but we are told by the Sunshine State Standards to do this and do that. It may look like we are empowered because we have 'site based management', but we don't have all that much power over how to run our schools.

It was clear from the data that most principals felt that they had control over the "how" of running their schools, but that the district and/or the state controlled most of the content or the "what" for the schools. Another principal pointed out that a school's grade isn't necessarily reflective of the learning taking place at the school.

> We are a 'C' school but it wouldn't take much for us to get to a 'D'. It wouldn't take much for us to get to a 'B' either. That doesn't [reflect] what happens today in the classroom. Unfortunately, what happens today in the classroom isn't important.

Although other principals made similar statements, all but a few of the principals expressed that they felt empowered and that they helped to empower others within their buildings.

High Stakes Testing and Morale

> We hear about [testing] on a constant basis every night on the news. We hear this with no face to this. We have a high immigrant population. They are deficient even in their home language. We're working hard, but there is testing madness. Generalizations are made as a result of the standards. The last five years have been demoralizing for teachers and it is becoming hard to find teachers willing to teach. And it is going to get worse.

The above quote was made by a "C" school principal. Her frustration was similar to the types of concerns that many principals expressed, especially those in "C" schools. These principals were concerned about teacher burnout, being able to hire teachers to replace those who burn out, and keeping morale high in general.

Several "C" school principals spoke about the fear of failure prevalent in their schools. One principal said, "Unfortunately, we are being ruled by fear—fear of failure." Another principal stated, "Behind every teacher is that fear that my children will not produce." This sense of fear permeated their buildings and affected the morale of teachers, administrators, and students. Although the "C" principals were the only ones who specifically mentioned fear, the

fear of failure was implicit throughout most of the interviews with "C-F" school principals and likely affected the morale within their buildings as well.

High Stakes Testing and Teaching Practices

This study suggests that a school's standardized test score does have an impact on the type of teaching practices and opportunities for enrichment that are available for students within that school, as well as the degree to which principals redirect their energies toward improving test scores. Principals in lower performing schools are more likely to modify their leadership focus to place a greater emphasis on improving test scores. Principals in higher performing schools seemed to focus on educating the whole child rather than simply concentrating on raising test scores, although two of the three principals of "A-B" schools noted problems with the emphasis on testing. One of these principals acknowledged that the "test drives the curriculum." The other principal said that she had no problem with assessment as a tool for accountability, however, in her opinion, the problem is with the number of tests that are administered. She felt that there was just too much testing.

Many of the principals in lower performing schools made comments indicating their frustration with the amount of attention being placed on test scores as the criteria measuring the success of their school. The principal of a "C" school said, "We prepare students to take these standardized tests, but that doesn't give kids an opportunity to show what they know." These principals made comments about the inappropriateness of testing for ESOL students and other diverse groups as well as the overemphasis on testing.

The "A" and "B" schools identified a variety of enrichment programs when asked to describe the greatest accomplishments for their school during the past year. Only one out of three of the "A" or "B" schools (33%) mentioned the school's report card grade or testing when asked

about greatest accomplishments for the school. In contrast, four out of eight (50%) of the "C" school principals mentioned improved test scores, and seven out of twelve (58%) of the "D" school principals and all three (100%) of the "F" school principals mentioned either an increase in test scores or the school-wide focus on student achievement. Other items mentioned by "C" through "F" school principals tended to address issues such as decreased violence in the schools, increased parental involvement, reducing class size, and improving morale and teacher professionalism. It appears that the principals in "C-F" schools were focusing their energies on meeting the basic needs of students and the community in addition to trying to raise standardized test scores. For example, these principals expressed concerns about finding faculty members who could speak the diverse languages spoken at their schools, addressing poverty concerns, and dealing with the violence in the communities surrounding their schools.

None of the "A" or "B" principals addressed the concerns stated above. There is a sense expressed by principals in these "A" and "B" schools that good instruction encourages higher test grades. Rather than placing an overwhelming emphasis on teaching to the test, these teachers are encouraged to use best practices in their classes. For example, when asked how standardized tests impacted her school, the principal of a "B" school responded, "We are raising the bar so students can demonstrate skills. Hence, we're changing teaching strategies and putting a greater emphasis on complex thinking skills and use of technology." Principals in high performing schools appear to be freer to encourage good teaching practices, while many of the principals in lower performing schools were forced to expend energies attempting to raise student test scores.

It is important to point out that not all of the principals felt that standardized test scores had a negative impact on teaching and learning in their schools. Aside from the "B" school principal mentioned above, three of the "D" school principals indicated that standardized testing

did influence their school, but that they viewed it as a positive influence. For example, one of these principals explained that because of the tests "...we always remain focused. Therefore, we all know what our goal is. We know where we are, and where we have to go in order to ... reach our goal. So it just keeps us focused." Another of these principals expressed that high stakes tests helped students to be competitive in society, and that she felt this competitiveness was an important skill for students' success in life. One of the "A" school principals stated that there was nothing wrong with testing except that there was too much of it. Overwhelmingly, though, most of the principals viewed high stakes testing as a detriment to their schools in terms of teaching and learning as well as their own ability to lead their schools. Interestingly, all of the "C" and "F" school principals commented about the detrimental impact that testing had on their schools and on their students.

Impact on Leadership

Principals in all of the schools (A-F) expressed that high stakes testing had an impact on their ability to lead their schools and influenced the types of activities in which they engaged. For example, the principal of an "A" school said, "It is always a juggling act. I must balance innovation with test support." The "B" school principal said that there was a greater emphasis on new strategies to improve student achievement. The principal of one "C" school complained, "That's all we talk about. All we focus on is how to get kids ready for those tests." Another principal said, "90% of what I do is geared toward helping teachers to improve standardized test scores." Most of the "C" school principals interviewed expressed that they have modified their leadership focus by placing a greater emphasis on working with teachers to raise test scores. Another illustrative quote regarding the emphasis on high stakes testing said "it runs everything" that we do. The principal of a "D" school stated,

> "Well, with standardized testing being such a priority, and that's what we are indeed judged by and graded upon, you know, we do have to give a great deal of emphasis to it. We have to make sure that our children are prepared. And so it means that we might have to, you know, kind of alter our curriculum in an effort to make sure that children are prepared and ready to meet those challenges."

When asked in what ways this emphasis on testing influences the ways that he leads his school, this principal responded, "It gives me, basically, my marching order as far as the direction I need to go." Later on in the interview this same principal was asked about the greatest accomplishments at his school over the past 12 months. This principal responded that there were beautification efforts as well as "some curriculum kinds of innovations that we've undertaken in an effort to raise our test scores." Clearly, high stakes tests had a profound effect on the leadership foci of this "D" school principal. The principal of one of the "F" schools said, "I push harder. We can't relax. There are things that I'd like to do, but I can't [because of these tests]."

Principals in "C-F" schools seemed to be quicker than principals in "A" and "B" schools to point out that they cannot run the school alone--that everyone needs to take responsibility for the success or failure of the school. Yet, principals in many of the lower performing schools perceive themselves as having to provide a greater degree of direction to teachers and others. This is highlighted by a statement made by the principal of an "F" school. "Collaboration is like a circle. There are different teams that I present things to, but sometimes I have to make an executive decision. I can't always wait for all of the committees to decide on things." Interestingly, the only principal that mentioned student-initiated programs was from one of the "A" schools involved in the study. It appears that in this "A" school, a greater degree of empowerment is extended, not only to teachers, but also to students.

Lessons About Empowerment

There are numerous lessons that empowered principals have to share with others. Most of the principals in this study clearly indicated the importance of "giving away" power, and that although it may take longer, collaboratively determined goals had a much greater chance of success. Four lessons emerged from our data. All of these lessons are consistent with literature on site-based decision making and empowerment. The first lesson is that schools are complex, requiring that many heads are needed to make good decisions. A second lesson centered on the importance of trust. Principals need to be trusted by their district office personnel and by members of the state department, but they must also trust their teachers, parents, and students. Issues of trust tie in with the third lesson learned—that many principals utilize democratic practices even with the emphases on high stakes testing looming over them. Finally, framing potential problems as challenges helps principals to overcome barriers and to maintain a positive attitude. Each of these lessons is discussed in this section.

Schools are Complex. Many of the principals spoke to the complexity of schools today and expressed that many heads were needed to meet the changing needs of students and society. As one "D" school principal said, " [Even] with all the empowerment I have, I can't do it all. We need the total support of everyone to help kids."

Trust is Essential. The principal of an "F" school said, "A school is a community that only the people there really know. It's like a family. A principal needs to be empowered and supported, but otherwise left alone. Once you hire a person to do a job you must trust her to do it well." This statement seems to capture the essence of what many of our principals in this study expressed. They felt that they should be left alone to empower others within their schools and to make site-based decisions that make sense for their schools rather than having to follow

bureaucratic processes and rules. Several principals emphasized the idea that "we're all in this together, and together we can make a difference."

Democratic practices. Even in light of the political and technocratic focus on high stakes tests, many of the principals used language and practices consistent with democratic practices such as encouraging diverse voices in decision making and empowering others. For example, one principal discussed her ability to help empower others. She stated,

> "I have a very strong staff. A very strong staff. I also have support—I have my own personal support from my family, from the people themselves. And there is a bond and effort of everybody who is on the same page and has the same vision. We are rated as a 'C' school and that's okay. There's nothing wrong with that. Do we want to do better? Sure, who doesn't ever want to do better? But… you've got to recognize the efforts [involved] in trying to make a difference."

The principal of a "D" school stated, "I'm only as strong as the members of my team." Her team included parents, faculty, and students. Another "D" principal, when asked about her greatest personal accomplishments replied,

> "I guess one of the things is my understanding that there is a better way to accomplish objectives. You know, by sitting down at a table with other stakeholders, be they teachers or parents, and getting them involved in the decisions that have to be made. Especially as they relate to those things that need to be done for children as far as raising test scores. And by laying the cards on the table, like that as far as what the needs are, and where we need to end up, everyone had the opportunity to kind of give some input. And say, 'well, this is what I feel my strength is, this is what I feel I can do to

> help us get where we need to be.' And in kind of working through that process and having all that mesh and come together. I consider that a professional and personal accomplishment."

Even though this principal was focused on raising high stakes test scores, he still was concerned about involving others in meaningful ways.

Problems as Challenges. Many of the principals in this study considered themselves to be empowered. It was not uncommon for these principals to speak about their ability to overcome or reframe problems. For example, one "D" school principal said,

> "I don't feel that anything keeps me from being empowered because there are ways to work within the restrictions, whatever they might be, to get things done. You know, restrictions are there for a reason. I might not necessarily agree with them, but they are there for a reason and policies are there for a reason. You know the thing that keeps this job viable is finding ways to work within the parameters that you have to get done what you have to have done. So I take it as a challenge."

Another principal from an "F" school replied, "I never see barriers. Some things happen and I do whatever I need to do to change it. Being labeled an "F" school could have been a major psychological barrier for the staff, but I try to be positive and persuade my staff to be positive as well." This "can do" attitude helped these principals to feel that they were in charge of their schools, even though there were limited opportunities for them to make decisions about high stakes issues such as curriculum, assessment, and budgeting.

Strategies for Empowering Others

Throughout most of the interviews, principals emphasized a number of strategies that they used to empower others. These strategies ranged from giving information to people and addressing problems as a team to providing staff development and being a good listener. Higher grades scored by the school equated to more emancipatory (Schubert, 1986) strategies such as student-centered learning, teacher as facilitator of learning, and attention to social needs. The three "F" school principals focused energies on staff development, providing information, being a good listener, and having events at night so parents could also attend. "D" school principals spoke about building teams (3), encouraging teacher leadership (4), keeping people informed (3), and providing financial and moral support for teachers (3). Several principals discussed more than one strategy that they use. Principals in "C" schools mentioned use of advisory councils (4). Other items were mentioned by one principal. These items include the importance of giving information and listening carefully (1), using humor (1), professional development (1), and helping to deflect stress (1) so that teachers can do their jobs. One "C" school principal said,

> "I think that what I've learned is to give it back and listen very carefully to what people are saying. [I'm] moving away from being an enabler to using my background in administration and really listening to them. So then I could lead them towards empowering themselves to make their own decisions about issues. And that could be anything from students to personnel issues."

All of these strategies are important means of involving others.

The "A" and "B" principals, however, identified the importance of not only giving information to people or turning people loose to make decisions that affect their own practice, but of developing common agendas, developing a "work/play atmosphere", and addressing

problems as a team. These principals spoke of numerous committees created to address issues in an on-going manner.

Discussion

Empowerment changes the political context in schools (Wheeler & Arguso, 1996) and the role of principals (Short, 1998; Wheeler & Arguso, 1996; Short & Greer, 1997; King & Kerchner, 1991; and others). Empowerment typically involves both personal and organizational issues such as how one's power is exercised or who is involved in decision making. The premise behind principal empowerment is that those closest to students know the context and needs of children in their schools and, consequently, should be meaningfully involved in decision making that impacts teaching and learning. A principal, as the leader of leaders within the school, is instrumental in creating a culture that enhances collegial efforts to do what is in the best interest educationally for the children attending the school.

The greatest barriers to empowerment appear to be state and district mandates or policies, some district office personnel and procedures, and lack of time. The bottom line regarding each principal's sense of empowerment seems to be his or her own attitude. Nearly all of the principals commented on the importance of doing what is in the best interest of students and teachers, regardless of the difficulties encountered along the way. King and Kerchner (1991) suggest that principals in empowered schools are "pragmatists with vision" (p. 10) and this seems to be the case with the principals involved in this study.

School leaders play a key role in the establishment of an educational environment. How they perceive their own ability to make a difference in their school greatly influences the way they interact with teachers and others. The national accountability climate continues to focus on

high stakes testing as the ultimate indicator of school and student success. Currently, forty-five states publish school report cards. Twenty-seven of these states use student test scores as a primary source of information to evaluate schools. Eleven of these states use this test data as the sole criteria for evaluating schools (Quality Counts 2001). Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to gain a clearer understanding of how this situation affects principals and consequently, the teachers and students in their buildings. The professionalism of principals and teachers has an important effect on student learning (Reed & Ross, 1999). If they are being forced to operate in ways that are counter to what they know to be best practices, then their ability to make a positive difference in young peoples' lives will be greatly diminished.

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Table One. Demographics of Principals

	A/B School	C School	D School	F School
School Type	1 HS	1 HS	12 Elem	3 Elem
	2 Elem	7 Elem		
Avg. Years as	2.7	5.2	6.3	4.0
Principal				
Race	2 White	7 White	3 White	1 White
	1 African Am	1 Hispanic	7 African Am	1 African Am
			2 Hispanic	1 Hispanic
Gender	0 Males	0 Males	5 Males	1 Male
	3 Females	8 Females	7 Females	2 Females
County*				
Adams	2	4	0	3
Washington	1	3	0	0
Davidson	0	1	12	0

* Names have been changed. The numbers represent the schools participating in our study that received these state report card grades in 1999.